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ABSTRACT

A school psychologist briefly describes the use of academic coaching with gifted students who are underperforming possibly because of a disability such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Coaches are urged to first, review the student's assessment data; second, determine the student's ability to benefit from coaching; third, determine that the student has enough motivation to improve his/her academic performance; fourth, identify the student's academic strengths and weaknesses; and finally, develop an action plan to teach techniques needed to improve academic performance. Techniques may cover such skills as organization and study, test preparation and test taking, note taking, goal setting and career planning, problem solving and conflict resolution, and transferring learning into daily practice. Coaching in such skills is likely to provide valuable life skills as well as enhance academic performance. Two case studies are offered to illustrate the techniques and effects of academic coaching with twice exceptional gifted students. Academic coaching is seen as more flexible than psychotherapy and better accepted by society. Noted is possible insurance coverage of academic coaching under some circumstances. (DB)

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ACADEMIC COACHING FOR THE GIFTED LEARNER

By

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Academic Coaching for the Gifted Learner

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In the past 35 years I have worked as a psychologist with hundreds of gifted children providing psychological evaluations, program planning, school conferencing, parent consultation, and counseling. In the course of evaluating these hundreds of cases, I discovered that two primary problems continue to linger long after the services are provided according to parental feedback. 1) Difficulties parents have working with the school(s), and 2) gifted children not performing up to full potential. The second problem, under-performance, has been difficult because of the multiple causes and variables that account for the problems. Research reported by Williams (1999) has shown benefits of coaching in increasing performance and productivity in various work settings. Therefore, it is felt that coaches in an academic setting will also be able to aid gifted students, particularly those considered twice exceptional, to increase their performance, productivity, and other learning skills.

To help approach the problem of the under-performing gifted student, parents should consider obtaining an academic coach. This would be comparable to serious athletes seeking out coaches to improve their skills and talents. Successful coaches motivate their players into top physical shape, fine tune their skills required of the sport, and also work on mental strategies of the game or sport. A player learns how to get motivated for a game and how to use positive mental imagery to increase performance (Shapiro, 1999).

School personnel are beginning to see the value of coaching for academic success. Students from elementary school through college show the disabling outcomes of poor academic performance in future vocations and daily living activities. Poor academic performance can also lead to social and emotional problems. Parents and educators argue that each other holds this responsibility to provide the structure for academic success. However, since neither parents nor school personnel have the time or resources to meet the needs of under-performing students, this would be an opportunity for an academic coach to provide these needs. The value of academic coaching is that the focus is on the student. Coaching can provides the skills, support, and training to enable students to take over responsibility for their own learning.

Gifted students are particularly well suited for academic coaching given their high potential and likelihood of success. However, the gifted student need not be "twice exceptional" or performing below ability to benefit from academic coaching. Highly motivated and serious students also benefit greatly from academic coaching to help them learn even more and take their performance to the next higher level. Elementary students will learn more from curriculum compacting and subject acceleration, and may show more benefit from grade skipping, concurrent enrollment, and mentorships. Secondary students may test out of basic courses so they can take more electives, including advanced placement courses. High school students looking for early admission to college or toward admission to a prestigious college benefit from coaching. College students entering highly competitive fields may have a competitive edge using a coach in gaining admission to difficult graduate school programs. Even adult learners returning to school after a long absence can use a coach to regain their academic skills. (Shapiro, 1999).

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At the same time a gifted student who also may have an educational handicap such as a learning disability, ADHD, or various social and/or emotional problems will benefit greatly from academic coaching. These students, sometimes called "twice exceptional" rarely get their needs met in school (Dansinger, 1999, 1998). Their full array of needs is often overlooked at school and, even if identified, is not usually serviced in all areas. Academic coaching will help the gifted child in any of the handicapping areas as well as in the areas in need of acceleration.

The coaching process involves a number of procedures regardless of the needs of the gifted student. First, the coach should have the student's assessment data such as intellectual ability, academic skills, social and emotional status, learning styles, and information about other needs and abilities. Next, the coach should determine the student's ability to benefit from coaching. For those students who may be showing a psychological disorder, a referral for mental health services would be more appropriate than coaching. There may be situations in which mental health services and academic coaching can be used together in the treatment plan. Thirdly, the student should have enough motivation or desire to put forth effort to improve his or her academic performance. The next step would be to obtain further information about various academic strengths and weaknesses such as study skills, preference for independent mastery and challenging tasks, and creative thinking. Finally, an action plan should be developed to teach techniques needed to improve academic performance. These skills or characteristics may include:

- Organizational and study
- Test preparation and test taking
- Achievement motivation and commitment to learning
- Anxiety management for test taking
- Time management and scheduling
- Goal setting and career planning
- Note taking
- Risk taking and perfectionism reduction
- Assertiveness training, advocacy, and communication skills
- Self esteem and confidence building
- Attention to task and work completion
- Problem solving and conflict resolution
- Peer relations and relating with other gifted friends
- Coping with frustration and expression of feelings
- Social competence and maturity
- Transferring learning into daily practice
- Accepting a preference for a challenge, intellectual curiosity, and independent mastery without teacher dependency
- Self directed learning and good work ethics
- Creative thinking and leadership
- Developing effective learning styles
- Awareness of various classroom settings
- Learning the culture and process of the classroom

- Advocating for and facilitating change
- Recognizing non rational behavior
- Building feelings of mastery
- Finding meaning, self-actualization, and greater balance in life.

The addition of these skills and techniques as well as the teaching and support of a personal mentor serves as a potent enhancement for change. Support, monitoring of progress, and accountability along with a personal interest in their success, provides most gifted students with the reinforcement needed to improve their academic performance. Furthermore, twice exceptional gifted students with academic coaching, are not only likely to enhance their academic performance, but, may also learn to live their life to the fullest. Through coaching, these individuals are better able to discover their true gifts as a person and a leader (Williams, 1999). They are able to identify and practice their life purposes, values, and goals in their daily living activities and relationships. Research reported by Williams (1999) compared training alone verses coaching and training. Training alone was found to increase productivity by 22.4%, while training and coaching increase productivity by 88%.

To illustrate the academic coaching experience with twice exceptional gifted students I have presented two case studies as examples.

An 11 ½-year-old boy, highly gifted intellectually and academically was taking several high school classes. His teachers were concerned about his irritation and rejection of classmates, inability to consistently follow directions and complete tasks, talking out of turn, being uncooperative with teacher, and having exaggerated feelings of anger and anxiety. With the approval of parents and school personnel, I met with this boy at his school. I held five sessions ranging from one to two hours per session over a two-month period of time. His mother was also present in three sessions and his high school counselor was present in one session. His classroom teachers were not present but I did talk with them before or after the sessions and they were aware of the plan and did monitor his progress. The boy was told about his teachers' concerns and was motivated to solve his problems. We worked on social skills such as showing respect, cooperating, following classroom rules, ignoring teasing, valuing classmates' comments, and not making noises during class discussions. We also worked on setting up a study schedule, taking notes in class, listening to classroom discussions, completing assignments on time, and talking positively with peers and staff. The boy and his mother were better able to discuss his angry and anxious feelings. I taught him relaxation exercises, visual and auditory imaging, how to study and take certain kinds of tests, better communication skills, better self control skills to counter impulsive behavior and to monitor his behavior. He would sometimes e-mail his progress and his teachers and parents would telephone me about his improvements. At the end of two months teachers agreed he was a more serious student, more cooperative, less acting out, and more positive in peer and adult relationships. He also felt he was a better learner.

In another case, I worked with a 7-year-old girl, gifted intellectually and academically, who was home schooled. Her mother / teacher was concerned about the girl's unhappiness about her younger brother surpassing her in some skill areas, not enjoying school work, feeling lonely and "bored", and complaining of trouble sleeping and of stomach aches. I performed an intellectual, academic and personality assessment and presented a coaching plan to the mother outlining specific goals and objectives, the ways I would coach her, and how we would monitor her progress. Over a six-week period I met with the girl and her mother separately for ½ hour each for three sessions at their home. We determined how the girl could be happier with family members, learning, and to formulate peer friendships. Our specific focus included commitment to learning, time management and scheduling, goal setting, assertiveness training, conflict resolution, peer and sibling relationships, self-directed learning, and building feelings of mastery. I discussed teaching these techniques directly with mother including how she could teach them to her daughter by role-playing. Parents also learned better communication, teaching, and parent management skills. As a result, parents were better able to meet their daughter's needs and she became happier and a better learner.

In these examples I, as a psychologist, served as the academic coach. However, coaches may come from a variety of backgrounds and training. Who makes a good coach? Originally, coaches came from athletics, the arts, and the corporate world. Surprisingly, only 15% of coaches are trained as psychologists even though psychologists' training, skills, and experience give a decided edge on being an effective coach, because they are experts at facilitating behavior change, listening, encouraging, empathizing, being non-judgmental and objective, and respecting confidentiality (Shapiro, 1999). The school psychologist who has already been trained in education, assessment, program planning and other services with exceptional children can be particularly creative and effective with the gifted learner. These characteristics would be true of many gifted consultants and some academic tutors who also would be well suited for academic coaching.

Academic coaching is more flexible and less restricted than psychotherapy and is also better accepted by society. The coaching can even be done by e-mail, fax, or phone as well as in person. Coaching is directed toward health and purposeful living, not problems in living and pathology. Obtaining services of a personal coach is a major shift in how an individual seeks help from a trained helper who can listen and assist him/her in desired changes in his/her life. For gifted students, it would be beneficial for all society to improve their current academic performance as well their life satisfaction.

Although schools spend a great deal for athletic coaches and special education services they do not have the funds for extensive coaching of gifted learners. At the same time, not all parents can afford to hire a coach even though it may be a very good investment. Various parenting and personal finance articles indicate the huge amount of money needed to raise each child and much of that goes toward their learning and education. However, many parents have not allocated a budget for coaching and the economic reality is that they may not be able to pay for these services. If parents cannot afford coaching services, the child is not eligible for special education or 504 services that includes coaching, or the school staff is unavailable for coaching, the gifted child will go without in spite of the ideal that all gifted children should have equal access to services.

Generally, health insurance would not cover academic coaching. However, depending on the nature and extent of the handicapping condition, health insurance may cover some services and some conditions with an ICD9CM or DSM-4 diagnosis by a licensed professional that affects the twice exceptional gifted child's learning. If this is the case, 504 classroom modifications and adaptations would apply and should be implemented. Parents of twice exceptional gifted children should be familiar with possibilities for potential insurance coverage and for 504 eligibility and programming. Parents should also be aware of school personnel who maybe available and effective as an academic coach.

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